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DAVENPORT ON... STICKY BUSINESS

It doesn't matter how interesting your information is if nobody's paying attention

By Thomas H. Davenport

The idea of "stickiness" is one of the most important ideas in electronic commerce-and business in general. In e-commerce, it's a measure of how much attention a website receives over time. In the information technology world, it's the first indication that we are focusing not just on information distribution but on usage as well. It shows we realize that if someone is going to be affected by information, they've got to devote some time and attention to it. In the web world, stickiness is currently measured because of its impact on the viewing of internet advertising. But the concept has much broader application. In fact, anyone with any information on the web today should be thinking about stickiness. If it isn't sticky, your website and the strategy behind it are almost certainly failures.

WHAT IS STICKY?

Even though stickiness is a relatively new concept, there's already some disagreement about what it means. Some argue that the stickiest sites are those with the longest average time per visit; others point to the importance of retention or of visiting a site often. To me it doesn't matter much whether viewers visit less often for longer periods or more often for shorter durations. The key in today's measurement environment is the overall number of minutes a viewer devotes to your site over a given time period, say a month. That's what Media Metrix, a web viewer behavior-measurement company, assesses. Perhaps in the future we'll have measures of what percentages of brain waves a sticky site is able to attract. For the moment, however, we're stuck with measuring how long a site is on your screen.

Of course, there are ways to game the stickiness system, some difficult and others simply clever. One reason that AOL can report high stickiness levels, for example, is that it's taken the trouble to build its own network and a rich content portfolio. No doubt crafty entrepreneurs are seeking easier routes to stickiness nirvana by encouraging you to leave their sites on the screen while you're doing something else that's time-consuming. If you leave a web-based TV channel guide on while you're watching the tube, or leave a recipe site on while you're cooking dinner, the websites will look very sticky. Ultimately, however, what will matter to websites and strategies is how much actual viewer attention they attract over time.

WHAT MAKES SITES STICKY?

Below are some guidelines as to what makes websites sticky. My recommendations are based on analysis of the stickiest sites and on the approaches of leading companies in this area.

Measures matter. One secret to succeeding at stickiness is measuring the phenomenon at every opportunity and adjusting your site accordingly. Server log analysis can tell you how long a unique visitor stayed at your site. If you can't use your website reporting tool to add up visit time over a month or so, get a new one. You may also want to compare your own site's stickiness to that of competitors. Unless you're a really accomplished hacker or know a traitor in your competitor's organization, you won't get this information without buying it from a web metrics company.

Once you've determined who's looking at what for how long, the key is to adapt your site accordingly. If people tend to spend the most time at web pages with a certain type of content, provide more of it. If you're not sure what your measures indicate, undertake a few experiments with content or format and monitor what happens. But if you don't measure stickiness, you won't be able to manage it.

Bet on breadth. One of the predominant strategies used by e-commerce companies to build stickiness is to create—often through acquisition—a very broad offering of content. Many of today's stickiest sites are portals, or content aggregation sites that offer a wide array of information to the browser. These sites are sticky purely because of the wide range of information options they provide. Internet users spend substantial amounts of time on AOL, for example, because it is a self-contained world of content, sometimes rivaling the entire internet for breadth of information offerings.

Let us entertain you. Some of the stickiest sites of all involve entertainment. To paraphrase P.T. Barnum, nobody ever went broke overestimating the desire of internet users for entertainment. Kids and adults spend hours online playing games of various types and monitoring noninternet forms of entertainment such as sports and movie review sites. Even if your primary purpose on the internet is serious, you can still entertain your viewers with quizzes, amusing content or chat. And as bandwidth to homes and businesses increases, we'll increasingly see movie and television-like dramas on our PCs.

Change content early and often. Perhaps the single most important factor in achieving stickiness is rapid changes in content. But changing content is a labor-intensive proposition. One way to get around this problem is to rely on others to change your content. The source could be providers of content that changes frequently by its nature, such as news, weather, sports scores and stock prices. Some sites rely on the users for changing content—auction sites, for example, can generally count on customers to rebid often, which leads other users to check their own bids. Sites that offer lower prices as more buyers sign up also provoke frequent rechecking of current price levels.

You can buy stickiness. Love may not be for sale, but stickiness is. Perhaps the most straightforward way to get people to look at your content is to pay them to do so. This is

the business model behind an increasing number of sites that offer money, gifts, airline miles, computers and internet service to customers who simply agree to view (and in some cases click on) ads. Another particularly sticky strategy is to offer free e-mail, as the sticky sites Hotmail.com and Netaddress.com have done.

The web is not enough. Branding is a key source of internet stickiness; with so many sites out there, users go for the ones they've heard of. And the way you become heard of is not just by making your undoubtedly excellent content available on your web server. You've got to advertise, preferably in as many media as possible. Suffice it to say that a number of dotcom companies spent multiples of their annual revenues to buy 2000 Super Bowl advertising spots. You could argue that this is another (very expensive, but probably worth it) way to buy stickiness in the marketplace.

Stickiness is critical on the internet, but it's also important for all forms of information in your organization. Whatever medium you're working with, you should begin to think about how you measure whether anyone's looking, how you can increase the breadth of information you offer, how you can make the source more entertaining, how often the content changes and how you might exchange something valuable for your viewer's attentive brain cells. You can view the web and the internet as practice for a world in which stickiness wins.

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